



Review: [Untitled]

Reviewed Work(s):

The Elephant Man by David Lynch

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Film Quarterly, Vol. 34, No. 4. (Summer, 1981), pp. 21-25.

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Film Quarterly is currently published by University of California Press.

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shadows before the window, Oblomov explains to Stolz that he has indeed thought about all this before—not how one lives, but why. The shot moves beyond the window to include a grand, sturdy tree, about which Oblomov waxes pedantic, but only momentarily, to illustrate the crisis of the superfluous man: why does one know all that he has learned? Wouldn't it be better to forget not just part, but everything? This speech leaves Stolz looming in the darkness, because it eloquently states the crisis of men whose education is rooted in the humanities as they face an era of progress and all-too-perfect technology.

Ultimately, it is not Oblomov's social conscience that is awakened by Stolz but his romanticism, for in part II, Olga Iljinskaja enters the picture. It is a standard *cherchez la femme* technique, which Stolz successfully applies, to make certain that Oblomov doesn't slip back into his inertia while Stolz travels in Europe. But even in matters of love, Oblomov's passivity is fatal, for he is capable of only one great gesture before sinking into the contemplation of nature and of his own feelings. In the idyllic gardens where he courts Olga, she expresses her dislike of a tree blocking her view. Subsequently, Oblomov takes to the tree, tearing, ripping, removing it from Olga's universe.

Under the influence of Oblomov's simple virtues, Olga also becomes a woman, ripe for Stolz's return, and with his energy and charm, Stolz sweeps her away. Olga's decisive, symbolic move to the driver's seat beside Stolz, leaving Oblomov in the back, virtually ends the film. A somewhat awkward

voice-over narrative sums up their lives: Stolz and Olga married, and Oblomov married and died after moving back to Moscow. A final scene of Stolz and Olga on a sleepy summer afternoon, dreading the arrival of Oblomov's widow coming from Moscow to visit Oblomov's son, brings the story full-circle. A child is seen running through the grassy expanses of Russia shouting, "Mother, Mother!" We are left with intimations of an eternal succession of superfluous men waiting for Mother Russia to awaken.

One need not point out that Mikhalkov's portrayal of Oblomov runs against the predominant Marxist interpretation. In defense of it, Mikhalkov suggested that the Oblomov-problem is really only a "problem" for those who believe in boundless progress and activity at any price: "A man who sleeps harms no one, and we can never know what his dreams—in the widest sense of that—will lead to." Mikhalkov has securely established his talent for making films aimed at a wider public than those of Tarkovsky, for example, and he can afford a minor thematic innovation for two. Or perhaps it is not so minor, when one considers the conditions and conditioning to which the artist is subjected. One has the impression that Mikhalkov himself is a composite of the Oblomov/Stolz personae: his is the energetic success story of Stolz; his dreams are those of Oblomov, if one can judge them from a pronouncement in Berlin (West) where he stated that the aim of art is to inspire faith, hope and love in mankind. To be sure, Tolstoy would agree; to be safe, would Chekhov?

Reviews

THE ELEPHANT MAN

Director: David Lynch. Script: Christopher DeVore, Eric Bergren, and Lynch. Photography: Freddie Francis. Production design: Stuart Craig.

Not since Shakespeare called for "A muse of fire" in *Henry V* and Olivier provided the light of an arc-rood projector has there been such an interesting opportunity to examine the relations between film

and theater as David Lynch's *The Elephant Man*. Since the film was not based on Bernard Pomerance's play of the same name, but draws on many of the same historical materials and case studies, it cannot properly be examined as an adaptation; instead, the specific decisions made by Pomerance and Lynch on how best to tell their respective stories of John Merrick reveal something about the basic terms and strategies of theater and film, and those distinctions in turn provide a clue to what *The Elephant Man*, as a film, is trying to accomplish.

Merrick was a hideously deformed young Eng-

ishman who was discovered in a sideshow by the anatomist Dr. Frederick Treves, who arranged for him to live in London Hospital until his death a few years later. In the hospital Merrick was visited by many of the leading lights of Victorian society, who were moved by his rare intelligence and sensitive manner of expression. In both the film and the play, Treves agonizes over whether he has advanced his own professional reputation by putting Merrick on display in what might amount to simply another class of freak show; in both, Merrick's handbuilt model of a nearby cathedral is a prominent symbol of his aspiration, drive, and luminous skill. The play, however, provides its audience much greater insight into and respect for Merrick's extraordinary mind and deals at length with the philosophical parameters of Victorian ethics. The film's critique of the latter is conveyed almost entirely through Freddie Francis's dark, sharp, black-and-white cinematography—a claustrophobic and depressing view of the Industrial Revolution as a circle in Hell; the script (by Christopher DeVore, Eric Bergren, and Lynch) deals in affecting but comparatively oversimplified terms with the nature of man and the power of love.

Both the film and the play force their audiences to consider the relations between inner and outer being, though the film—at least on the script level—does not push much beyond the insight that Merrick is “not an animal” but “a human being . . . a man.” Lynch's only previous film, the cult hit *Eraserhead*, deals like *The Elephant Man* with the problem of the painfully unacceptable child, and in both films Lynch has appropriately had recourse to many of the themes and devices of classic horror film. The Frankenstein monster, for instance, is a paradigm of the rejected child, and the project in many horror films—like that in Aristotelian tragedy—is to interrelate dread of the horror object with a sympathetic recognition of his, her, or its essential humanity. The humanism of *The Elephant Man* is conveyed not through its script so much as through its deliberate echoes of such compassionate horror films as *The Island of Lost Souls* (“Are we not men!”), *The Bride of Frankenstein*, *Freaks*, and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*; the spirit of Lon Chaney, Sr. is particularly felt, not just in the eloquently vulnerable performance of John Hurt

as Merrick, but in the tone of the entire project. To say all this, and to credit the brilliance of the Dolby stereo mix, the convincing sets, the editing, the costumes, the thoroughly professional acting by all concerned, and the arty but nevertheless magnificent cinematography—all this would be to give *The Elephant Man* its due, in its own terms, as a sensitive and moving version of Merrick's story that does not wish to be compared with a certain brilliant play. But it is in that comparison that the point of this review and the genius of the film are to be found.

The most significant decision Pomerance made was not to give the central performer “elephant man” make-up. Instead Merrick is played by a “normal” actor who adjusts his posture and gait into an analogue of Merrick's while the audience is shown authentic photographs of Merrick in the nude. The audience, then, is continuously in the process of reminding itself that Merrick is grotesquely deformed, while watching and hearing the evidence that Merrick is a beautiful being. The actor's task is to allude to physical handicaps while projecting directly Merrick's probing intelligence and wit. This play converts the theater into a very private, almost textual space, where the conceptual emphasis natural to language—always the mainstay of Western theater—fits naturally with the emblem of the actor who displays the inner Merrick. For the audience this is a profoundly doubled experience, and it is on this experience that the play's best verbal investigations are constructed.

As an experience in what might be called the theater of compassion, Lynch's *Elephant Man* is precisely opposite to Pomerance's. Here Merrick is presented in (accurate) make-up. Generically, this puts things on the footing of horror film; commercially, this means the film is liable to appeal to several kinds of audience, including those who like to go to freak shows. But the most interesting level on which this decision operates is this: *cinematically*, this decision was obvious, and was probably made with no consideration of the play whatever.

It often used to be said that film could not attain the complexity of literature, the intimacy of theater, the structure of metaphor, or the abstraction of music simply because it was confined to showing the surfaces of physical objects, including

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people. Bazin did much to advance the notion of the transcendental landscape, Eisenstein demonstrated the range of several kinds of visual metaphor, Godard found the relations between persons and objects to be entirely problematical anyway (in *2 or 3 Things*)—and few readers of this journal are likely to be biased against the possibilities of film expression. Nevertheless, the fact remains that it is both appropriate and natural for a *film* on Merrick to show Merrick's body. The film audience, then, is in the position of continuously reminding itself that Merrick has a spiritual inner beauty, while watching and hearing the evidence of his deformity. This is in its own way just as humanistic an experience as that offered by the play, pointing to much the same conclusion. But the implication of these opposed poles of audience approach is that theater, like literature, encourages the spectator to generate a visual image of its full world while presenting an inherently conceptual text—whereas film, by presenting a visual world, encourages the spectator to generate a view of the interior and to organize an understanding of the concepts, emotions, and metaphors implied by what is shown.

What is exciting here is not this fairly rudimentary insight but the obvious ease with which the two versions of *The Elephant Man* demonstrate its accuracy and suggest the terms of its expansion. Charles Lamb once observed that *Hamlet* could not be successfully performed but had to be read in private, because the theater was too public a space for such meditations to be expressed or credibly enacted. Pomerance's *Elephant Man* transcends that limitation of theater by radically interiorizing its space. Lynch's film would seem at first to be simply a proof that Lamb was right, but about the limitations of the too-physical space of cinema. Lynch's ultimate project, however, is to demonstrate the interiority of film space (both via analogies to kinds of theater and through an examination of its own cinematic processes). And although Hurt carries the immediate burden of leading the audience past his make-up and into a sense of his essential grace, Lynch and his co-writers are very much in evidence as the creators of a structure in which the film addresses its own potential and guides the audience to examine its own quality of vision. *The Elephant Man* is most profound in its reflexivity, and most affecting in its



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use of what in another context I have called "mind-screens." For all that these observations about the inherent qualities of the media announce is not the absolute expressive limits of film or theater but the natural tendencies that demand to be confronted and gone beyond if a great form is to emerge. Rudolf Arnheim said in *Film as Art* that film's limitations make its art possible, but it is further true that to grapple with the dialectic of such limits is to advance the form as well as its canon of possibilities, and the task in this particular film is to assert if not define the quality of what cannot be publicly seen.

This brings us around once again to the problem of the freak show, which is also the problem of the nature of theater. One does not see the "elephant man" clearly until a half-hour of film has passed, and this delay teases the audience into an awareness of its desire to see how this freak actually looks. At the point of maximum expectation, when Treves (Anthony Hopkins) is given a private showing in the carnival, one sees not Merrick but Treves's shocked, compassionate reaction to what he sees. When Merrick is finally shown frontally and in the light (via a shock cut, in his hospital bed) and a nurse screams, one recognizes a stock technique from the horror film—one that lets the audience feel comfortable with its own voyeuristic impulses, at least for that instant. The more Treves worries about the moral implications of his putting Merrick more or less on display, and the more the obvious villains in the plot are presented as those who want to make money by luring audiences in for a view of Merrick, the more the audience must ask itself what the moral implications are of making a commercial

film that offers as its primary spectacle the grotesque "elephant man." Indeed Lynch goes well out of his way to put Merrick in a French freak show, to have him repeatedly and violently abused, to display his humiliation. There is also a good deal of talk about the nature of theater, which often offers some kind of "spectacle" (film, of course, even more so)—but the implication of this film is that spectacle and the desire to peek at the abnormal are both limited structures of the possibilities of vision.

As the actress Mrs. Kendal, Anne Bancroft introduces to Merrick the notion that "The theater is the most beautiful place on earth; the theater is—romance." Many of the voyeurs who torture Merrick are men who hope that the women with them will be sexually stimulated by the horrific vision (which is a well-recognized function of horror-film dates, especially in drive-ins); this is the level of "romance" encouraged by some aspects of grotesque spectacle, including pornography, and it hardly needs to be observed that love, like any really significant aspect of one's life, is much determined by the parameters of personal vision. Vision must be educated beyond the physical if one is to see the world in its fullness and if love is to become a personal, spiritual, political reality. This notion of love is larger than that of the "romance" of theater, but it is not false to the implications of Lynch's film.

Mrs. Kendal is the character whose role seems most truncated in relation to its parallel in the play: here she brushes into Merrick's room like Billie Burke in *The Wizard of Oz*, and within two minutes she and Merrick are trading a sonnet from *Romeo and Juliet*. It all seems too fast, too easy, until one recognizes that Mrs. Kendal is the Good Witch of the Theater, that she does have a magic wand; her vision of the theater of beauty, which is drastically different from the freak show and from the industrialized, oppressive landscape Lynch portrays in most of this film (which is itself a dialectic of "theatrical" possibilities and so cannot be called a theater of ugliness; one would need, like Derrida, to write *freak/show* under erasure). In the play it was most important that Mrs. Kendal was understanding and that she was a woman; in the film the emphasis is on her magic. When she calls Merrick "Romeo" she is addressing not his sexual potential but the transfiguring power of

role. In her beauty and her magical acceptance, Mrs. Kendal is most like the figure of Merrick's mother (he sets their portraits together on his night table), to whom we will turn in a moment.

The Elephant Man is a sequence of shows—practically nothing else—and its climax comes when Merrick is, for the first time, a member of a theatrical audience. In a sequence that looks as if it had been edited on video, Mrs. Kendal's fairyland performance is shown (often in multiple exposure, sometimes over Merrick's face, and often hard to follow) as Merrick experiences it. For the first time Lynch offers an example of the theater as a site of fantasy (vs. industrial realism), of beauty (vs. grotesquerie), and of private experience. And it is clear that by now what he says about theater applies to film. This is the only point where *The Elephant Man* offers both objective and subjective events simultaneously, as the performance as seen by Merrick and an objective view of Merrick's watching are integrated. The wholeness of this vision, then, is not in some notion of art's escapist or fantasy value, nor in the grim realism of much of this film, but in that power of integration—especially the integration of interior and exterior realities, which was of course the audience's project in both versions of *The Elephant Man* all along.

At this point irony rears its head—or perhaps the moment is meant to be taken as some kind of apotheosis—and Mrs. Kendal turns the audience's attention to Merrick's presence, dedicating the performance to him. The audience applauds; Merrick is asked to say something or at least to stand—that is, he is once again "on stage." When he rises, the audience gives him a standing ovation. This might be read in two ways, and you will have to decide between them (keeping in mind that this will amount to a decision about the tone of Merrick's subsequent suicide, in which he dies for the experience of sleeping like a normal person); that Merrick can never entirely join the community of an audience that must always be somehow the spectacle; or else that *this* audience, applauding rather than gaping and hooting, is a good audience and sees in him much that is of value. The latter—and even the irony that arises when both these interpretations are credited—offers this film's audience a vision of its own best possibilities under the circumstances, and thus

both educates their responses and (by saying that not all audiences are perverse) lets them off the hook.

Lynch has been preparing for this vision of inner theater all along, of course, and the final key to the film can be found in its four mindscreen sequences, which are certainly as powerful as anything in the rest of the film and balance its ruthless exteriority in a disturbing and beautiful way. In the first sequence, which opens the film (after some reflexively flickering credits), a vision is presented of Merrick's metaphorical conception: images of elephants and a thrashing woman, preceded by a view of the mother's face and followed by a billowing mist. The second is Merrick's dream, just after he has seen his own reflection in a window and realized that a hospital worker will soon be exhibiting him: there are images of hellish industry, and then some men force a dark plate toward the screen, which becomes a mirror in which Merrick—perhaps remembering an event in his deep past—sees his own face as a child. (In the following scene Merrick screams at his adult reflection in a mirror held by the hospital worker, but it is clear that he does this because that gross audience expects it.) The third sequence is Merrick's vision of Mrs. Kendal's play. The fourth, which closes the film, is a view of his death, in which he moves toward and into a starry vision of his mother's face. As she softly declares that "The heart beats . . . Nothing dies," the camera pulls into a white space between her eyes, and the image is for the first

time entirely light. Then the credits come flickering back, reasserting the problem of vision.

The opening and closing sequences are not necessarily Merrick's views, though the inner two are; the images of birth and death may well proceed autonomously from the film's own reflexive process; and if they do, that only makes more strong Lynch's affirmation of the power of subjective—finally auto-subjective—film (a power perhaps best realized, as here, in dialectic with radical objectivity). The point is that these sequences balance the freak show, offer a richer possibility for cinema, assert that film can be a "theater" of inner being no matter how much it may appear bound to the surfaces of physical reality. The image of the mother, which for Merrick is a central vision of love and all that love means—including the possibility of rejection, a reminder of that beauty from which his ugliness has separated him, the first person he imagines he "disappointed"—becomes in the final moment an image of love, of acceptance, of transcendence: for Merrick, for the deeply moved audience, and for cinema.

—BRUCE KAWIN

A POSTSCRIPT:—

Since the film purports to present Merrick's story factually, and since both film and play are often inaccurate, readers may wish to consult Michael Howell and Peter Ford's *The True History of the Elephant Man* (New York: Penguin, 1980).

Film Books: The Year's Work

In each Summer issue, *Film Quarterly* publishes a round-up of film books issued in the preceding year. The output has remained impressive, despite increasing difficulties in the economics of publishing; our coverage this year is only a few pages shorter than last year's, and the number of titles is almost the same. In the reviews and annotation below we have included all film books that have come to our attention (a few have doubtless evaded us) plus a number of works on television.

JEAN RENOIR: The French Films, 1924-35

By Alexander Sesonske. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press [Harvard Film Studies], 1980. \$25.00 cloth, \$9.95 paper.

Even before Jean Renoir died in 1979 the "Renoir industry" had come to mean not the production or the re-issue of his films, but the production of books about them. Those in English include Leo Braudy's *Jean Renoir: the world of his films* (1972); the disappointingly scrappy collection of Bazin's